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Sound as performative space

ABSTRACT

This article discusses how the combination of circumambient sound and predominantly fixed camera position in It Can Pass Through the Wall *achieves a similarly spatial and performative use of sound to that found in multi-channel electroacoustic concert performances. I consider to what extent space itself can 'tell a story'.*

KEYWORDS

acousmatic
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In his discussion of the 'superfield', Chion describes the spatial dynamic achieved by the use of multi-channel sound design in cinema as one in which 'the image [...] plays a sort of solo part, seemingly in dialogue with the sonic orchestra in the audiovisual concerto' (1994: 151). It is an analogy indicative of the 'performative turn' that Aalbers identifies as underpinning the study of contemporary film sound (2014: 304–05), spearheaded by Altman's consideration of film as event, and somewhat implicit across the broader field. It is perhaps strange therefore that theories pertaining to the performative dynamic of the manipulation of sound in space as afforded by multi-channel configurations employed in electroacoustic concert music have remained largely outside of this discourse, particularly given the extent to which the language of electroacoustic music has informed approaches to sound design and scoring practices in film with regard to timbre and gesture.

It Can Pass Through the Wall presents a useful, if somewhat unlikely, case study in this respect, not because its sound design is overtly sophisticated but because its embrace of acousmatic sound offers a possible means with which to bridge the apparent gap in this research area. A chamber piece in every sense of the word, the film is – notwithstanding the charm of its visual

language – largely sound-dominated. Sound defines its temporal length: diegetic sound is heard during the black screen of the opening and closing credits sequences that bookend the film. Due to the fixed, camera position of the film's single take, it is sound that emerges as the primary vehicle for articulating the film's narrative as well as mapping the dimensions of the diegetic space of the apartment in which the action takes place, reinforcing the underlying theme of restricted vision experienced by the characters. The film's aesthetic, in many ways, captures the immersive quality that Kerins argues is characteristic of the deployment of circumambient sound technologies in contemporary cinema: '[…] audience members [are] literally placed *in the middle* of the diegetic environment and action […] It creates a continual "present" [… that] emphasizes the filmic narrative […] so as to experience the events of the story as those characters do' (2011: 130, original emphasis). We too are situated in the middle of the diegetic space (the apartment). In this instance, the waist-high camera angle corresponds to a head-high perspective for Sophia that places the audience member in a position of audio-visual empathy with her.

More significant, however, in terms of beginning to draw possible comparisons with electronic music is the film's lack of camera movement. Restricted to a minimal use of panning, which largely occurs during the film's opening and conclusion, the predominantly fixed visual plane of *It Can Pass Through the Wall* compels the audience to experience much of the film in an 'eyes-front' manner that exemplifies Altman's Plato's cave analogy (1992: 5) or that of Philip Brophy's black box, holding the audience's view while sound 'delights in rejoining actualized space to projected image' (2004: 8–9). The experience is not entirely removed from the forward visual orientation commonly encountered in concert situations (Smalley 2007: 52); the height of the camera even gives the effect of being seated. The relative absence of visual activity obliges us to focus on what is taking place sonically. The aforementioned camera placing even seems to situate the audience in a position that replicates the (often central) audio 'sweet spot' of the circumambient acousmatic image associated with multichannel electroacoustic concert performances. Just as the sweet spot is itself a restricted field, so too is the confined position that we seem to occupy within the apartment; there is little room for anyone else. We are offered a personal, intimate and somewhat privileged position from which to experience the film.

The film's broader audio-visual language prompts further comparisons with electroacoustic music. During the film's opening moments, it is sonic timbre and audio space – in the absence of any diegetic image – that are used to establish the character of diegetic location and those within. The husky warmth of the two men's voices and crisp sound of dice being rolled against a wooden game board provide a richly dry timbral foreground that captures both a sense of spatial intimacy as well as a necessarily rustic quality long before these attributes or indeed the source of the sounds are visually confirmed. Similarly, the presence of distant ambient sound from the outset – the sustained white noise of traffic punctuated by the sporadic barking of a dog – immediately extends the diegetic periphery of the film beyond the interior walls of the apartment. These concentric sonic layers, in a sense, present us with the film sound equivalent of the local/field model that Emmerson hypothesizes as defining the auditory frames within the live performance of electronic music (2007: 92–102): sounds emanating from human action in our locality (local) heard against a broader contextual soundscape (field).

The entry of the film's visuals serves to affirm the physical boundary between the localized diegetic space of the apartment and the unseen diegetic world beyond. As the camera intermittently pans right to left to give a panoramic overview of the apartment over the first two minutes of the film, reflecting the more conventional filmic approach to establishing 'spatial anchors' (Donnelly 2009: 109), sound continues to extend the periphery of the film's diegetic space beyond the audience's field of vision applying a sonic signature to various spaces. The urban reality of traffic noise and ambient wind sounds remain frontal while the rear of the soundscape indicates the arrival of those entering and leaving the apartment along with the clock chimes at the end of the film. The muffled wails heard from the adjacent apartment (off-screen right) – arguably the film's narrative kernel – contrast with the brief adult conversation that occurs outside the apartment's front door (off-screen left) as Alecu and Sophia talk on-screen.

In many ways, the manner in which the film unfolds reflects the similarly cumulative strategy that Smalley outlines regarding the construction of the acousmatic image necessary to the understanding of acousmatic music. Using his own experience of looking out over the Orbieu River from the vantage point of a first floor window, Smalley describes how the identification of various perspectival spatial zones in which particular audio events reside and the relationships between these events informs an holistic view of the acousmatic space-form of his experience of the landscape/soundscape in question (2007: 35–37). A significant outcome of this strategy is that the temporal evolution inherent in this process is ultimately sidelined: 'I can collapse the whole experience into a present moment [...] time can be placed at the service of space rather than the reverse' (Smalley 2007: 37–38).

It is a similar undermining of time in favour of space in *It Can Pass Through the Wall* that affirms the film's identity as a performative piece. While there is a narrative trajectory of sorts, there is little in the way of narrative conclusion: although Sophia has drifted off to sleep by the time the visuals cease she has still not gone to bed – two men are still playing backgammon and are even rolling the same four-one combination that opened the film. We are instead presented with an extended snapshot, an event the narrative logic of which is at least rivalled and often superseded by the interplay of audio-visual gestures. No more is this apparent than with the story of the buried daughter that the blind neighbour tells at the heart of the film. Here, the tale's unsettling, supernatural undertone is afforded sonic resonance by the aforementioned muffled cries of the grieving mother playing on the audience's timbral preconceptions of the cries of an interred body as well as the more conventional sense of threat and uncertainty often attached to acousmatic sounds in film (Donnelly 2009: 117). This ultimately allows the tale to, in some part, reside within the film's diegetic present in multiple guises. The recurrence of audio gestures (the sound of rolling dice, barking, high frequency whistles of large vehicles braking, fragments of speech) combine with repetitive visual gestures (red objects at the top right of the screen) to playfully confuse a sense of linear temporality. Elsewhere, it is the polyphony of simultaneous conversations taking place within concentric spatial zones amid the diegetic field rather than the meaning of those conversations that is significant.

Although simple in its material make-up (the entire soundtrack is diegetic), the integral role of sound in *It Can Pass Through the Wall* functions not just to define the film's diegetic dimensions but to harness space as a performative vehicle with which to articulate a rich soundscape of sustained and vertical

gestures as well as in interplay of recurring audio-visual events. By extending its sonic horizon beyond the audience's visual plane, sound enables the audio-visual and narrative language of the film and by consequence, our filmic experience, to pass through the proverbial walls of its diegetic perimeter allowing space to condense the film into a spatial, performative event. It is sound, as space, that tells the story (Emmerson 2007: 92).

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